

Barrhaven Independent 30 years, 30 people: Melanie Gauthier

By JEFF MORRIS

As we celebrate our 30th Anniversary, the Barrhaven Independent will be featuring 30 people who have played a prominent role in building and shaping our community from the time we were a sleepy little suburb in 1990 to the thriving city of more than 100,000 we are now.

In this issue, we are featuring Melanie Gauthier. For years, Melanie was a driving force in the community as a volunteer and philanthropist. She impacted many lives through her involvement in community fundraising campaigns, particularly the popular Chills for CHEO events. She was also visible in the community having worked for both Councillor Jan Harder and MPP Lisa MacLeod. Sadly, she passed away more than four years ago. Her funeral at Capital Memorial Gardens in January, 2016 had a spillover crowd that filled three rooms.

Barrhaven lost a relentless fighter for the community and one of its best citizens when Melanie Gauthier passed away at the young age of 42.

Mel had a sandpaper edge and an acidic sense of humour, but was one of the most giving, loving and selfless heart-and-soul people you could ever meet in your lifetime. Our first reaction was we never thought any of us would see Mel die, for if death dared come near her, she would attack it and fight it and send it away quivering.

I thought about what words or metaphors we could use to describe Mel. She's so much more than a cliché. Melanie was the first person to drop everything



and to just jump in and do whatever was needed.

She didn't just jump into problems head first. She jumped in heart first.

Everything she did in this world – everything – she did heart first. There was no halfway with Mel.

I thought about the day I met Melanie. She was involved with Chills for CHEO and she contacted me to, well, "inform" me that I would be doing a story. It was the first phone call I took on the day I arrived in Canada after moving back from Seattle. Some people just ease into your life and they are there, but you can't remember how or for how long. Melanie wasn't like that. She lunged into our lives, heart first.

And every one she met became one of her friends. She was always there for us. When you go through a tough or dark time, some people back off and distance themselves from you. Not Melanie. She took on your problem and sorted you out and sat you down at her kitchen table and then made you one of her amazing grilled cheese sandwiches. She made you feel good about yourself – like there was someone who cared – someone you could count on. She was a real friend – with the purest of hearts and enough soul to fill 10 people.

Her door was always open, whether she had just met you or whether you were one of her seemingly hundreds of best friends. The kitchen table seemed to be her vortex of life – like the bar everyone would sit at when they went to their pub. Her home was everyone else's second home, filled with comfort and love, music, and especially laughter.

Yes, laughter like you would never experience anywhere else. Her wit was sharp and delicious, as venomous as it was playful. She loved to make us laugh. As biting as her humour was – it was delivered from her heart.

Her husband, Steph, described her in her obituary as a fierce mother. Her daughters, Brogahn and Lowri, are two wonderful girls who have their mother's strength and creativity and courage and heart. They still have the coolest mom in the world, it's just that now she is in Heaven.

I don't know what Heaven is like, but I imagine Melanie turned the place upside when she arrived. I imagine Melanie has reconnected with some of the people close to her that she has lost.

I hope she has a big kitchen table and she is surrounded by love and laughter. The thing that is most important about Melanie is that she was an angel among us. She was selfless and relentless and did so much good in the world and helped so many people. I can only imagine how many wonderful things she can do in our world now that she is a real angel.

So how do we celebrate Melanie?

There is a lot we can do. The first thing is remembering not just who she was, but what she stood for. She was Pay it Forward before Pay it Forward became popular. When she immersed herself in something, people would ask her, "Why are you doing this?" She would always say "Why aren't you?" or, on the rare occasion that she chose to be diplomatic, "Because it needs to be done."

We can celebrate her by grabbing some that free spirit that would lead her to take the girls onto the driveway in the pouring rain and dance. We could seize that inner passion that was such a part of her and make every single day count – not for ourselves, but for someone in need. We could be that



shoulder to lean on for a friend in need who may be in a dark or lonely place.

The world needs more Melanies, but since her passing, we are short one.

So why not celebrate Mel by being more like her. Let's wonder each day how

we can make the world a better place. Let's do everything in our lives heart first, just like Mel would. What a beautiful legacy that would be for such a beautiful and wonderful person.

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Barrhaven Independent 30 years, 30 people: Eric Leighton

As we celebrate our 30th Anniversary, the Barrhaven Independent will be featuring 30 people who have played a prominent role in building and shaping our community from the time we were a sleepy little suburb in 1990 to the thriving city of more than 100,000 we are now.

In this issue, we are featuring Eric Leighton. He became a household name in our community after an explosion at Mother Teresa High School would claim his life. But as the community learned more about Eric Leighton, they learned that he was so much more than just a victim. Eric Leighton was a leader, a friend, an athlete, and someone whose infectious personality inspired those around him. Very few people have the ability to make the world a better place when they leave it. Eric Leighton did exactly that. He touched the hearts of everyone in Barrhaven. He was named the 2011 Barrhaven Independent Glen Dicks Person of the Year.

BY JEFF MORRIS

Barrhaven has seen far too much tragedy in the last decade and a half for one community to absorb.

There is a long list of young people who have died in the community – from car accidents to cancer to murder and even a horrific bus-train collision.

Nine years ago, Eric Leighton died in one of those tragedies. It was a sad and horrific day in Barrhaven, and it is one that no one who was in the community at that time will ever forget. And for his many friends, Eric Leighton was a person who no one will ever forget.

Leighton was killed May 26, 2011 at St Mother Teresa High School. He passed away from in-



juries suffered in an explosion, as he was cutting through a barrel to make a barbecue in class. Leighton loved hockey and lacrosse, and he had played minor hockey in the Nepean Raiders and Ottawa Senators Triple-A programs before moving on to the Junior B Almonte Thunder. He was excited about becoming the captain of the Almonte Thunder of the Eastern Ontario Junior B Hockey League the next season. The Gloucester Rangers Junior A draft pick joined the Thunder after a successful minor hockey career that culminated at the provincial Minor Midget AAA championships in the spring of 2010. Leighton began the season with the Ottawa West Golden Knights and was traded to Almonte, where he had 20 points and 25 games and became the team's rookie of the year.

Following Eric's death, Pat and Sheri Leighton chose the Canadian Tire Jumpstart Program as the charity of choice for their son.

Jumpstart gives kids from families in financial need the same chance to participate as their neighbours, their classmates and their friends. The vision of Jumpstart is simple: Canada, where all kids have a chance to fulfill their dreams.

Jumpstart is a national charity with a commitment to local communities. Organized sports connect kids to their communities. Canadian Tire Corporation recognized this and makes sure that money raised stays where

it is donated. Canadian Tire Corporation is Jumpstart's biggest supporter as it funds all the general administrative expenses of Jumpstart, which means 100% of customer donations go directly to help kids in need.

"Eric loved sports, and he was all about helping kids and encouraging everyone to play," said Sheri Leighton.

The I Love to Play Hockey Program in Memory of Eric Leighton now operates in 10 communities across Ottawa, including the area where Sherri grew up.

"It's all about getting kids equipped with skates and gloves and sticks – enough that they can go and play at an outdoor rink," said Sheri. "The kids in the program all get a jersey with Eric's number (25) on the back. They all learn about Eric's story and they get to know the kind of person he is."

Sheri said that she and her husband, Pat, see Eric's passion for hockey in the eyes of the kids helped through the program.

"The kids always skate up to us and say thank you," she said. "Eric loved hockey and he loved helping kids, so this is a perfect program to have his name attached to."

Eric Leighton used his passion for sports to connect with people, help people and make friends.

Leighton was fatally injured when an oil drum containing peppermint oil residue exploded in the school's shop class. The class was making barbecues out of the drums when an explosion occurred. Leighton, seven other students, and a 33-year-old teacher suffered injuries. According to classmates, Leighton lay on the floor, covered in oil and residue, and was bleeding from the mouth. In all, six people, including Leighton, were

taken to hospital.

When paramedics arrived on the scene, Leighton had no vital signs. Paramedics worked aggressively on Leighton en route to the hospital, and they were able to regain a pulse.

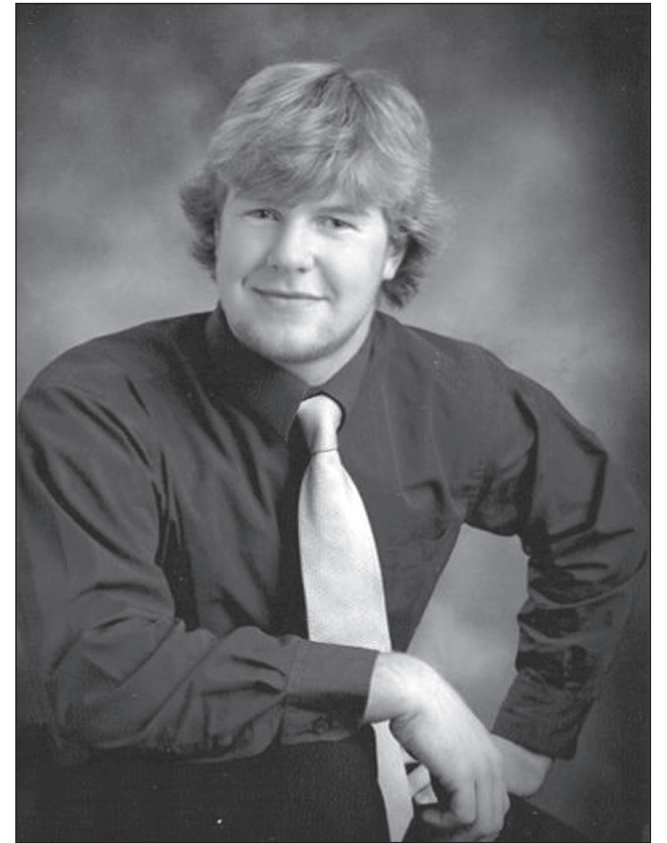
Mother Teresa students were evacuated from the school, and they assembled in the gymnasium at Longfields Davidson Heights Secondary School next door. Police allowed 10 parents into the gym at a time to release the students in a process that took nearly three hours.

The teen's family and friends were at his side throughout the day, and at 8 p.m. that night, he passed away from the injuries suffered in the explosion. St. Mother Teresa Principal Mary Ellen Agnel informed the students of his passing via e-mail.

"It is with a heavy heart that I inform you that a Grade 12 student, Eric Leighton, passed away in the hospital evening around 8 p.m.," she wrote. "Please keep Eric's family, the staff and students, and our large Mother Teresa community in your thoughts and prayers during this difficult time."

After word of Leighton's passing reached the student population, hundreds of students gathered in front of the school Thursday evening at a makeshift memorial for the young man. Friends described Leighton as a popular student who was a leader at every level. He excelled on the Mother Teresa lacrosse team. The St. Mark High School Lions of Manotick, who won the city championship, wore purple arm bands at the Ontario championships to honour Leighton, as many of the St. Mark players were Nepean Knights teammates of Leighton.

In 2014, five jurors



will come back with their safety recommendations after hearing evidence related to the shop class explosion that killed Leighton. The recommendations were supported by Leighton's parents.

The suggested recommendations include but are not limited to:

- Ontario school boards should maintain a list of approved student projects for high school technology classes.

- School boards should establish safety guidelines for high school technology classes.

- Safety passports for tools and equipment should be obtained by a student before they're allowed access to it.

- Consideration should be given to not allowing any hot work on closed containers in high school technical shops.

Eric's father Patrick Leighton said implementing the rules should be a "no-brainer."

"Put these rules in place and there's no risk," said Leighton.

The inquest jury may choose to recommend some or all of the suggested recommendations,

or come up with its own recommendations. Patrick Leighton said he was happy to have the inquest come to an end, but said he had hoped for more of an apology from shop class teacher Scott Day.

Day had assigned Eric Leighton the barbecue-making project, had obtained the old oil barrel and had instructed classmate Adam Soliman to clean the drum with what turned out to be a flammable solvent.

But he told the inquest he hadn't given Leighton any approval to start cutting the barrel when the explosion happened.

"Eric meant a lot to him, in his words, and he meant a lot to Eric, we know that for a fact, he really enjoyed his class and I kind of wish he would have showed Eric a bit more respect in that aspect," said Patrick Leighton.

The inquest ruled Leighton's death an accident. Patrick and Sheri Leighton said the ruling gave them closure, and said Eric would have been proud of them for how they represented him and spoke about him during the inquest.

Barrhaven Independent 30 years, 30 people: Ken Ross

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In this issue, we are featuring Ken Ross. For years, Ken was a driving force in the community as a business leader and philanthropist. He was responsible for the formation of the Barrhaven BIA and fought constantly for the strength and growth of the Barrhaven business community. He was a tireless leader for Barrhaven's non-profit organizations, including the Barrhaven Food Cupboard. Sadly, Ken passed away in 2015, but the fingerprints he left on this community will last forever.

BY JEFF MORRIS

Time has a funny way of moving on and seemingly changing speeds.

Last week, Ken Ross would have turned 60. Those who knew him miss him, and it is hard to believe five years have gone by since his passing.

For thousands of people who are new to Barrhaven, Ken Ross may be simply a name on the sign at the big sports and park complex on Longfields Drive. But he was so much more than that. Ken Ross was selfless leader in the community. He was Mr. Barrhaven.

But as much as he was Mr. Barrhaven, few in the community knew of his humble beginnings. Maybe it's because Ken Ross was always asking about other people, and not ever talking about himself.

Ken was born in 1960 and grew up in North Bay. His parents, Richard and Sheila, had three boys. Ken was the oldest. When he was 16, he began working in the grocery business. He worked for Brian Dollar at the Dominion Store in North Bay. It was a part-time job in high school, and Ken would say



that he didn't realize that the job was shaping his future. He kept working for Dominion while studying Business at Sault College and then Laurentian University, and he was becoming engrained with knowledge of the grocery business.

His young career took him to Elliot Lake and Barrie, then Timmins, and onto Sudbury and then Ottawa. He grew as a business leader and worked his way up – he would like this pun – the grocery food chain. He knew that he wanted his own store. He became a manager for Loeb in Ottawa at a few different locations, all the while developing a passion for reaching out to the community. He had already done tremendous work with the food bank in Sudbury, but the ice storm in 1998 really showed Ken what his true calling in our world would be.

Life threw Ken a curve ball in 2000 when he was first diagnosed with cancer. As a 40-year-old, he met it head on. He had surgery, six months of treatment, and got right back on his horse – or in his case, his motorcycle. That was his other passion that not many knew about him. He was the ultimate Easy Rider.

Then, his life took a turn for the better.

"There was a friend who asked me to have a coffee with him to discuss a franchise opportunity with the Independent Grocer Franchise (National Grocers)," Ken said at his 50th birthday. "Steve Ashe and I met several times. The deal was struck and I was headed for what 'so many reasons' was the best thing that ever has and ever will happen to me. I



Ken and Kelly Ross turned Ross's Your Independent Grocer into an integral hub of the community in Barrhaven.

became the Franchisee of Ross' Independent Grocer in Barrhaven, as we all know the very best place in the world to work, live and play."

But the Barrhaven store wasn't the best thing in his life. The woman he would share it with was.

Ken loved to tell the story of how he and Kelly met. It was through work. Kelly's maiden name is Ross. "I looked at this beautiful woman and I said, 'Hey, nice name.' We were already Ken and Kelly Ross, so I guess it was meant to be," he would say.

They loved growing their business and their lives together in Barrhaven. For Ken, it was all about building relationships.

"Kelly and I were eager to work, live and play in the very community we love," he once said. "There would be very few activities in Barrhaven that we wouldn't have our hand in, in one form or another, hosting or helping to fund or facilitate. There were amazing relationships de-

veloped with the Lions Club, the Legion and Rotary Club and what would develop."

Councillor Jan Harder was one of the first people to meet and greet Ken to Barrhaven.

"I thought boy, if you can meet half of your goals and dreams, Barrhaven is going to be lucky," Harder said of meeting Ken. "Very early, he kept rolling out so many initiatives, whether they benefited individuals, CHEO, schools, or businesses. Remember, Barrhaven had the great good fortune of having grocers like Dana Conley, and before him, Dave Crotty. They both set a high bar but for Ken, it was like jumping the hurdles. He was always a glass full kind of guy. He had amazing ideas and read the needs of the community so well."

Jan probably knew Ken better than anyone in the community did. They had an incredible working relationship at many levels. Their friendship was pure and their respect was mutual. Jan relied on Ken's

energy and leadership to help grow the community. And behind every project and initiative Ken took on, Kelly was working hard behind the scenes to make sure both the store, and the community initiatives, were all successful.

"Ken was our go-to-guy," Jan said. "He made events better, he led business development, he championed Barrhaven and he made it better. He saw a need for those needing support of food. He is a founder of the Barrhaven Food Cupboard and in fact because it mattered so very much to Ken, Kelly and family to know he would appreciate anyone contributing to the building of the Barrhaven Food Cupboard."

As a business leader, Ken had a vision for Barrhaven, and for his where his business would fit into it. He was the driving force behind establishing the Barrhaven BIA. Sitting on the BIA Steering Committee with him was when I really got to know him. I picked up on his goals and visions very quickly, but

more importantly, I was exposed to what drove him and what motivated him. He was a genuine person with a rare level of passion.

Ken's passion spilled out of him and touched everyone and everything around him. It was easy to see how much love he had for his business. He loved meeting customers and, as he would often tell me, creating a special experience for them every time they came in the store. He loved his employees like they were family. His level of compassion for his staff was among the greatest I have ever seen. He had a wonderful passion for Kelly, and he would often say that she was the key to building all of the relationships in the community. He loved Kelly dearly, but what was truly beautiful about seeing them work the store together as a family business was how much he trusted and respected her.

KEN ROSS
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KEN ROSS continues from page 12

One of the first stories I wrote on Ken was when he and Kelly received recognition for having raised a half million dollars for causes in the community. He also received the Good Neighbour Award from the Greater Nepean Chamber of Commerce. He downplayed the accolades, wanting to drive the attention on the causes and how much help they needed rather than what he and Kelly had done.

There were so many causes that Ken attached himself to. And Ken Ross didn't just attach his name to causes or projects. He attached his passion and his tremendous level of focus and commitment. He was there to lead the way when the South Nepean Autism Centre was formed. He was a tireless champion for the Barrhaven Food Cupboard.

My last chat with Ken happened, like most did, in his store. We talked about the Sens and the NFL playoffs and how Christmas was. He filled me in on what was going on with the food bank. Predictably, he was dripping with enthusiasm. It was routine. The same type of conversation with the same type of smile and handshake and warmth that he had for me every time I had seen him over the past decade.

And then, we got the news that Ken was ill and in hospital.

Kelly suggested to me that perhaps we should do a story on Ken, on all of the great things he had done for the community. Knowing that Ken was in ICU and that his health was failing, I started to realize that I was pulling files together for a tribute to Ken. She talked about how, even on his way into the hospital, Ken worried that there were a few things that needed to be done for the food bank, and he wanted to be able to work from the hospital. I procrastinated a bit in putting the files together, not wanting to believe that I would never see my friend – our friend – again. But, deep down, Kelly knew the day was coming, and so did we.

The moment I got the text from Kelly that Ken had passed away, I was at an Ottawa Senators game. She had texted earlier in the day to give me a heads up that it may be his last day. Personally, that moment will be etched in my mind forever.

I don't think there is a per-

son who knew him who didn't cry at least once after his passing. My moment came on the way home from work the next day. I drove past the store, as I always did, and I started to think about the automated announcements on the P.A. system excitedly telling me about what Grandma Ross had ready for me at the take out counter. I used to tease Ken when I was chatting with him and the announcements would come on. I would look around, up in the air, look at him, and ask, "How do you bloody do that?"

As predictable as it was, he would always laugh and smile, then carry on.

But, one night, as I drove past the store, I pulled over. I thought of his voice, and of the heartbreak of the people of the store, and of our wonderful friend Kelly. I broke down and cried – a from-the-toes-up crying session that was the first of many to come over the next few days.

I asked Jan Harder about what she thought Ken's legacy would be.

"Ken Ross's legacy will be his love for Kelly, his love of his family and community, the impact he has had on Barrhaven, for Barrhaven, and the leadership he has shown time and again," she said. "He was a leader of business, he craved good competition. He was a very good and decent man who I loved as a dear friend



Few people in Barrhaven knew of Ken Ross's passion for motorcycles.



Ken Ross championed many causes in Barrhaven. The Barrhaven Food Cupboard was one cause that was close to his heart.

who could not win the ravaging battles within his body, and who left us far too soon, but definitely not without leaving a tremendous impact on all of us. Ken Ross was special and, yes, we will celebrate and commemorate him. It will take a while to find a special way to do so."

Ken loved us all. He had a way about him that made us love ourselves. And every time any of us spent time with him, we all left thinking the exact same thing. I have thought

it every time I have reminisced about my old friend – our old

friend – since his passing five years ago.

I wish I could be more like Ken Ross.



Metcalfe Hockey Team 1907

Back Row: J. Moxley, W. Hopkirk, J. Johnson, E. Rolston, C.S. Trickey
Front: N. Kennedy, W. Campbell, S.S. Latimer

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